



THE UNDER SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR BENEFITS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20420

Date: June 7, 2000
To: All VBA Employees
Subj: 20/20 Broadcast of June 2, 2000

Some of you might have seen a segment broadcast on Friday, June 2nd on ABC's 20/20 program, about "missing" veterans' records. The program left viewers with the impression that, either through negligence or indifference, VA often fails to obtain veterans' service records needed to approve claims or that we lose records we already possess. This simply is not true. For VBA employees who've spent years, if not decades, helping veterans and often taking the 'extra step,' watching the program must have been troubling. For the over 45 percent of you who are veterans yourselves, it must have seemed outrageous.

The program mixed issues that have only a tangential relationship to each other and misunderstood some of the fundamental features of the claims process. For those of you who deal with these issues every day, that was immediately apparent. Using individual veteran's experiences to draw broad conclusions about a system that includes millions of individuals and billions of documents, the program fell victim to what Dr. Ken Kizer (VA's former Under Secretary for Health) called the "Tyranny of the Anecdote."

Remember, just six months ago, 20/20 reported that we were paying too many claims and not getting enough information to support PTSD payments.

We successfully handle an enormous number of claims each year and make an important difference in the lives of veterans and their families. Given the size and complexity of what we do, mistakes are made. That is not meant to explain away our errors but merely to place them in perspective. One error in handling a veteran's claim is one too many. That is why we've undertaken the most significant changes in overhauling this system since the Second World War, including:

All VBA Employees

- Moving from an “assembly line” process for handling claims to one in which each veteran will have a specific individual or team assigned to his or her claim. This case managed approach, which will commence in 41 of 57 regional offices before October 1, 2000, will dramatically improve communications to veterans.
- Establishing an additional level of review of veterans’ claims issues in each regional office through our Decision Review Officer (DRO) program. Widely hailed by veterans and their representatives in the pilot sites, DROs should be in every office by next year.
- Allowing servicemembers to file disability claims before separation from active duty. This growing program, now at more than 60 locations, will allow us to provide unparalleled service and will eliminate most of the difficulties we currently face in securing records.
- Assigning more than two dozen VA employees to the National Personnel Records Center to help secure veterans’ records from the National Archives. This unprecedented effort will eliminate the massive backlogs in that operation within a year.
- Directly receiving, since 1993, veterans’ service medical records from the Department of Defense as soon as a servicemember ends active duty. Our Records Management Center can provide these records to regional offices within a week of the request.
- Working with the U.S. Center for Unit Records Research to develop speedier access to military organizational records. This process currently can take upwards of a year.
- Bringing on-line, within a year, a host of IT applications which will make claims processing faster and more accurate. This includes beginning to image our current paper files, redesigning

Page 3

All VBA Employees

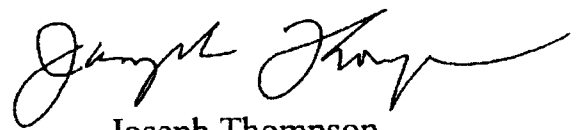
our processing screens, and providing up-to-date information on claims so that veterans can know the status of their claims.

- Rewriting our forms and form letters in plain language -- an effort in which we are among the leaders in the Federal government.

While these national initiatives will support our vision of providing world-class service to veterans, ultimately it will depend on the actions of individual VBA employees throughout the country to make sure this vision becomes a reality. Each of us must ensure that we've done everything in our power to enable veterans to receive the benefits they've earned. Collectively, we must make sure that we never stop trying to improve our systems to respond to the needs of veterans.

The most important issue overlooked by 20/20 was that despite a two-decade-long decline in the number of living veterans, the unprecedented level of complexity of the disabilities being claimed and the enormity of the change this organization is undergoing, today we pay more veterans for more disabilities than at any time in U.S. history. Contrary to the show's central premise, this fact speaks to your hard work and dedication in securing information necessary to help veterans with their claims.

Thank you for what you do to help veterans.



Joseph Thompson